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THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF COUNTRY BRAND IMAGE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMERCIAL DIPLOMACY AND EXPORT PERFORMANCE

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Abstract:
This study aims to examine the effect of commercial diplomacy on export performance and to demonstrate the mediating role of country brand image in this relationship. In the global trade environment, countries compete not only through economic capacity but also through their effectiveness in international relations. In this context, commercial diplomacy refers to the strategic use of diplomatic channels, such as foreign missions, to generate economic benefits and enhance firms' access to international markets. The research was conducted through a survey administered to 259 participants working in Turkey's export sector. Correlation, regression, and structural equation modeling analyses reveal that commercial diplomacy has both direct and indirect effects on export performance, with country brand image playing a significant mediating role. Based on these findings, the study recommends the development of more effective commercial diplomacy strategies through stronger public-private cooperation.

Keywords:
Commercial diplomacy, country brand image, export performance, investment, mediating variable

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of international trade under the influence of globalization has compelled countries to open up to foreign markets in order to sustain their economic growth. In this process, production capacity and price competition alone are no longer sufficient; the foreign policy and diplomatic strategies pursued by countries at the international level have also gained critical importance. In this context, one of the prominent concepts is commercial diplomacy, which is regarded not merely as an extension of interstate relations but also as a fundamental tool influencing the success of the private sector in global markets. Commercial diplomacy is conducted through foreign missions, trade attachés, commercial counsellor offices, and multilateral economic collaborations, aiming to protect and advance countries' economic interests in international markets.

Commercial diplomacy does not solely aim to increase trade volume; it also seeks to shape countries' external perceptions and build long-term competitive advantages. At this point, the concept of country brand image comes into play. The country brand image is a multidimensional structure that defines how a country is perceived abroad and directly impacts its economic relations. A positive country image in international markets enhances trust in a nation's products and services and positively influences consumer preferences. Country image is shaped by numerous factors such as political stability, cultural values, innovation capacity, ethical standards, and environmental responsibility. For instance, Germany's reputation in engineering, Japan's leadership in technology, and Italy's association with design are typical examples of this phenomenon.

Moreover, commercial diplomacy can be considered a tool of soft power, enhancing a country's influence through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). In this sense, managing perceptions in global markets becomes a vital element of sustaining international economic competitiveness.

Within this framework, it is considered that the practices of commercial diplomacy indirectly contribute to export performance by positively influencing the country brand image. This effect is particularly critical for developing countries, as they often face "perceptual barriers" and struggle with prejudices regarding the quality, price, or sustainability of their products. Here, another significant role of commercial diplomacy emerges: to break down these prejudices and reconstruct the country's image.

This study aims to analyze the impact of commercial diplomacy on export performance while examining the mediating role of country brand image in this relationship. Within this scope, the following research questions are addressed:

• How do commercial diplomacy activities affect export performance?
• What role does the country brand image play in this relationship?
• When commercial diplomacy and country brand image are considered together, what kind of synergistic effect is created on export performance?

In line with these questions, the research aims both to contribute to the theoretical literature and to offer practical recommendations for policymakers and practitioners. The study employs a quantitative analysis based on the structural equation modeling method and evaluates data obtained from representatives of firms operating in the field of international trade.

In the following sections, the concepts of commercial diplomacy, country brand image, and export performance will be examined in detail, followed by the methodology, findings, and discussion parts of the study.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section, the fundamental concepts of the research—commercial diplomacy, country brand image, and export performance—are discussed in detail, and the relationships among these concepts are analyzed within a theoretical framework. In particular, the historical development of commercial diplomacy is explained, and country brand image and export performance are evaluated together to form the foundation of the theoretical model.

2.1. The Conceptual Framework and Historical Development of Commercial Diplomacy

Commercial diplomacy refers to the set of planned and integrated activities undertaken by states to support their foreign economic relations and to enhance the competitiveness of national firms in international markets. Positioned at the intersection of traditional diplomacy and economic interests, commercial diplomacy is carried out through mechanisms such as foreign missions, commercial counsellor offices, bilateral trade agreements, international organizations, investment promotion agencies, and trade fairs or networking events (Saner & Yiu, 2003). The primary objectives of these activities are to facilitate the entry of domestic firms into new markets, overcome trade barriers, promote foreign direct investment, and strengthen the country brand to ensure the sustainability of commercial relations (Lee & Hudson, 2004).

The history of commercial diplomacy dates back to the late 19th century, following the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent increase in the need for international trade. Initially in Europe and later in the United States, trade attachés were incorporated into diplomatic missions, and throughout the 20th century, this structure became institutionalized. During the Cold War period, the ideological dimension of economic diplomacy gained importance, with commercial interactions serving as a tool for détente between opposing blocs.

Since the 1990s, with the processes of globalization and regional integration, commercial diplomacy has been redefined and integrated with public diplomacy, country branding, cultural promotion, and foreign direct investment strategies. In this context, commercial diplomacy has evolved into an instrument not only for economic purposes but also for building international image and trust.

2.2. Country Brand Image

The country brand image is a multilayered concept that reflects how a country is perceived by the foreign public, consumers, and international commercial actors, encompassing cultural, political, economic, environmental, and societal dimensions. This image is influenced by numerous factors such as political stability, cultural heritage, technological advancement, environmental sensitivity, and social responsibility. Simon Anholt (2007) defined this concept as “perceptual capital” and developed the Nation Brands Index (NBI), which measures country image across six dimensions: governance, exports, culture, people, tourism, and investment-immigration, thereby enabling international comparisons. The Nation Brands Hexagon model identifies these six key dimensions as essential components of a country's brand image, providing a comprehensive framework for assessing both functional and emotional aspects (Anholt, 2007).

Similarly, Dinnie (2008) argued that a strong country brand image is a strategic element that enhances the effectiveness of foreign policy instruments. A positive country image improves the perceived quality of products, strengthens consumer trust, and positively affects export potential (Eroglu & Machleit, 1989; Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002). In this context, country brand image is not limited to tourism or diplomacy but is increasingly regarded as an economic asset that provides a competitive advantage in international markets (Fetscherin, 2010; Olins, 2002).

Country image also influences foreign trade performance, particularly through the country-of-origin effect based on consumer perception. Kotler and Gertner (2002) demonstrated that country image plays a critical role in shaping consumer behaviors, tourism preferences, and investment decisions, while Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002) emphasized that country perceptions influence attitudes toward trust and quality in product preferences. This effect holds strategic significance, especially for developing countries. A positive country image creates a soft power advantage that enhances attractiveness not only in consumer choices but also in investment and foreign trade relations.

Conversely, a negative country image can act as a significant perceptual barrier, making it more difficult for firms to penetrate foreign markets and diminishing trust in their products and services (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Thus, not only building a strong positive image but also avoiding negative stereotypes becomes critical for sustained export success.

2.3. Export Performance

Export performance is a multidimensional concept that measures the level of a firm's success in foreign markets, encompassing not only financial indicators but also strategic, operational, and perceptual components. This performance is evaluated through quantitative indicators such as sales volume, profitability, and market share, as well as qualitative indicators such as customer satisfaction, brand reputation, and sustainability in the market (Zou & Stan, 1998; Lages & Montgomery, 2004).

Determinants of export performance include internal factors such as the firm's marketing strategies, organizational competencies, adaptability to foreign markets, and resource utilization, alongside external factors such as country image, trade policies, and global economic conditions (Leonidou et al., 2002; Katsikeas et al., 2000).

The export success of firms is not solely based on their individual capabilities but is also directly related to the commercial infrastructure and diplomatic support provided by their countries. At this point, the country brand image functions as a "perceptual facilitator" for export performance. The study by Sun, Paswan, and Tieslau (2016) revealed that country image indirectly affects exports; a positive image facilitates the export process and contributes to performance. Particularly through the country-of-origin effect, the perceptions of consumers and business partners play a significant role in the valuation of a product or service. Therefore, a strong country brand image should not be seen merely as an intangible value but rather as a concrete performance-enhancing factor for exporting firms.

2.4. The Relationship Between Country Brand Image and Export Performance

Country brand image is a strategic variable that influences how a country's products and services are perceived in international markets. This image can directly affect the purchasing behaviors, brand preferences, and investment decisions of consumers and business stakeholders (Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002). A positive country image enhances perceptions of product quality and reinforces firms' competitive advantages. Particularly through the country-of-origin effect, perceptions regarding the country from which a product originates shape consumers' mental frameworks and play a crucial role in their decision-making processes (Eroglu & Machleit, 1989).

Export performance, on the other hand, is considered an outcome that reflects the degree of firms' success in foreign markets. This success is not determined solely by a company's marketing strategies or operational efficiency; it is also closely related to the country's overall reputation, cultural soft power, and diplomatic effectiveness. In other words, firms are influenced not only by their own performance but also by the reputation of the country they originate from (Sun et al., 2016).

In this context, there is a two-way and complementary relationship between country brand image and export performance. Firms associated with a positive country image are more easily accepted in target markets, face fewer cultural barriers, and enjoy stronger pricing power. For instance, images such as "Made in Germany" or "Designed in Italy" reinforce perceptions of quality and reliability among consumers, thereby enhancing firms' sales and growth performance (Fetscherin, 2010; Dinnie, 2008).

Moreover, for exporting firms, a strong country brand image plays a decisive role not only in short-term sales but also in long-term market presence and brand building. A well-managed country image can indirectly support marketing activities, positively influencing customer loyalty and repurchase rates (Lages & Montgomery, 2004; Leonidou et al., 2002).

Based on these findings, it can be argued that country brand image not only has a direct impact on export performance but also generates indirect effects when combined with other policy tools such as commercial diplomacy. Therefore, country brand image should be considered not merely as a perceptual factor but as one of the key components of foreign trade performance.

2.5. Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

The theoretical model of this study is based on the following three hypotheses:

H1: Commercial diplomacy has a direct positive effect on export performance.

Commercial diplomacy enhances the competitiveness of national firms by facilitating market entry, reducing trade barriers, and building economic partnerships, which in turn positively impacts export performance.

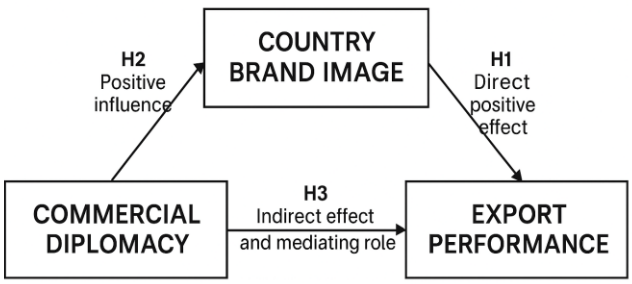
H2: Commercial diplomacy positively influences the country brand image.

Through promotional activities, strategic communication, and international collaborations, commercial diplomacy shapes the external perception of a country, thereby strengthening its brand image.

H3: Country brand image mediates the relationship between commercial diplomacy and export performance.

A positive country brand image fosters trust and quality perceptions among international consumers and business partners, serving as a mediating mechanism between commercial diplomacy efforts and improved export performance.

This model highlights the multifaceted effects of diplomatic activities on economic outcomes and emphasizes the importance of perception management in international markets.



CONCEPTUAL MODEL

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study was structured to test causal relationships and adopted a quantitative research approach. The relational survey model was selected as the research design. This model is a widely preferred scientific method used to reveal existing relationships between variables and to develop structural models. In this study, commercial diplomacy is treated as the independent variable, country brand image as the mediating variable, and export performance as the dependent variable.

3.2. Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of specialists, managers, and representatives working in foreign trade companies operating in Turkey as of 2024. A purposive sampling method was employed in the sample selection process. The total population size was estimated to be approximately 90,000 individuals. Based on a 10% margin of error and a 90% confidence level, the minimum required sample size was calculated as 225 participants. In practice, valid data were collected from a total of 259 participants.

3.3. Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire form was used as the data collection instrument. The questionnaire consisted of four main sections: participants' demographic information, the commercial diplomacy scale, the country brand image scale, and the export performance scale. The survey items were adapted from previous studies and translated into Turkish through expert consultation. An online method was preferred for administering the surveys.

- The commercial diplomacy scale was developed based on Saner & Yiu (2003) and consists of three sub-dimensions: Investment Diplomacy and Economy, Market and Legal Infrastructure, and International Institutions and Actors.
- The country brand image scale was based on the studies by Anholt (2007) and Kotler & Gertner (2002).
- The export performance scale was adapted from the criteria developed by Zou & Stan (1998).

All scales utilized a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The reliability coefficients for the scales were found to be quite high: Commercial Diplomacy (α=0.95); Country Brand Image (α=0.97); and Export Performance (α=0.99).

3.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS 25.0 and AMOS 20.0 software. In the preliminary analyses, descriptive statistics, frequency and percentage distributions, normality tests, and internal consistency analyses were conducted. Subsequently, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to assess construct validity.

For the testing of hypotheses, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and hierarchical regression analyses were applied sequentially. The presence of a mediating effect was tested based on the approach proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), and the results were supported by the Sobel test. In addition, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to validate the conceptual model. Model fit was evaluated using indices such as the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), and Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI).

4. Findings

This section presents the analysis of the data obtained within the scope of the research and the results of hypothesis testing. The data were analyzed using SPSS 25.0 and AMOS 20.0 software. In addition to descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation testing were conducted. The findings are presented sequentially under the subheadings of descriptive statistics, scale validity, correlations, regression results, and structural equation modeling, in line with the theoretical model of the study.

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

An evaluation of the participants’ demographic profile reveals that 66% of the respondents are male, while 34% are female. Regarding age distribution, the majority of participants (35.1%) fall within the 31–40 age range. The education level is predominantly at the undergraduate (58.3%) and postgraduate (36.7%) levels. This distribution indicates that the participants represent a highly qualified workforce. The duration of export and professional experience is relatively balanced across the sample. Furthermore, a significant portion of the respondents (45.1%) are employed in large-scale companies with more than 100 employees engaged in export activities. This distribution suggests that the analysis results reflect the perspectives of young and well-educated individuals working in the foreign trade sector.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

		n	%
Sex	Man	171	66,0%
	Woman	88	34,0%
Age	Under 30 years	35	13,5%
	31-40 years	91	35,1%
	41-50 years	76	29,3%
	51-60 years	42	16,2%
	61 years and above	15	5,8%
Education	High school or below	13	5,0%
	Bachelor's degree	151	58,3%
	Postgraduate (Master's/Doctorate)	95	36,7%
Export Performance	1-5 years	64	24,7%
	6-10 years	53	20,5%
	11-15 years	59	22,8%
	16-20 years	39	15,1%
	21 years and above	44	17,0%
Professional Experience	1-5 year	36	13,9%
	6-10 year	40	15,4%
	11-15 years	53	20,5%
	16-20 years	60	23,2%
	21 years and above	70	27,0%
Number of Employees	1-5	34	13,1%
	6-10	22	8,5%
	10-50	57	22,0%
	50-100	29	11,2%
	100-500	63	24,3%

	501 and above	54	20,8%

4.2. General Structure of the Scales and Sub-Dimensions
The scales used in the study measure three main constructs:
• Commercial Diplomacy (3 sub-dimensions)
• Country Brand Image (single dimension)
• Export Performance (single dimension)

Table 2. Scales and Their Sub-Dimensions

Scale	Sub-Dimension	Example Item	Cronbach's Alpha
Commercial Diplomacy	Commercial Diplomacy and Investments	Trade counsellor offices serve as guides for market entry.	0.93
Commercial Diplomacy	Competition and Legal Dimension	We receive official support for the removal of trade barriers.	0.91
Commercial Diplomacy	International Institutions and Actors	Cooperation with regional organizations contributes to exports.	0.89
Country Brand Image	General Image	The reputation of my country positively influences product quality.	0.97
Export Performance	Financial & Strategic	Our external sales volume has significantly increased over the past three years.	0.99

4.3. Verbal Explanations of Survey Items and Conceptual Evaluation
The sub-dimensions of the commercial diplomacy scale aimed to measure participants' experiences with state support in foreign trade activities.
In the "Commercial Diplomacy and Investments" dimension, participants were asked about the guidance received from trade counsellor offices, the flow of information regarding foreign investment opportunities, and the level of connection with local investors. A large majority of participants reported a high level of agreement regarding the effectiveness of these services (mean > 4.20).
In the "Competition and Legal Dimension," the sufficiency of information provided regarding import-export regulations, taxation structures, and free trade agreements was evaluated.
The "International Institutions and Actors" dimension focused on the state's representation capacity through international trade organizations and sectoral trade fairs.
The country brand image scale measured components such as the perceived reputation of the country, its ethical and cultural values, technological advancement, and the quality of branded products.
These items were assessed within the context of how consumers' country-based perceptions influence brand preferences.
The export performance scale considered both quantitative (e.g., sales volume, profitability, number of markets) and qualitative (e.g., customer satisfaction, repeat orders) outputs.
Participants generally evaluated their growth over the past three years positively (mean > 4.30).

The internal consistency levels of the three scales used in the study (Commercial Diplomacy, Country Brand Image, and Export Performance) were found to be very high.
The Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were calculated as 0.95, 0.97, and 0.99, respectively.
These values indicate that the reliability levels of the scales are within the "very high" category, demonstrating that the data are suitable for analysis.

Table 3. Reliability Coefficients of the Scales

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Commercial Diplomacy	0,95
Country Brand Image	0,97
Export Performance	0,99

The internal consistency levels of the three scales used in the study (Commercial Diplomacy, Country Brand Image, and Export Performance) were found to be very high.
The Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were calculated as 0.95, 0.97, and 0.99, respectively.
These results indicate that the reliability levels of the scales are within the "very high" category and that the data are suitable for further analysis.

4.4. Correlation Analysis

The linear relationships between the variables were tested using the Pearson correlation coefficient.
The results are presented in the following table:

Table 4. Correlations Between Variables

Variable	Country Brand Image	Export Performance
Commercial Diplomacy	0,81**	0,74**
Country Brand Image	-	0,78**

Note: $p < 0.01$ level of significance.

According to these results, there are positive and high-level significant relationships between all variables.
The correlation coefficient of 0.81 between commercial diplomacy and country brand image indicates a strong interaction between these two constructs.

4.5. Regression and Mediation Analysis

Table 5. Regression and Mediation Test (Sobel) Results

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p
Commercial Diplomacy	Export Performance	0.42	0.07	0.37	5.78	<0.001
Country Brand Image	Export Performance	0.61	0.05	0.53	9.94	<0.001

According to the multiple regression analysis, commercial diplomacy explains 54% of the variance in export performance ($R^2 = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$).
When country brand image is added to the model, this rate increases to 68% ($R^2 = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$).
This increase indicates that the country brand image variable makes a significant contribution to the model.

Moreover, based on the mediation analysis conducted through the Sobel test, country brand image was found to be a significant mediating variable in the relationship between commercial diplomacy and export performance ($Z = 4.82$; $p < 0.01$).
This result supports the H3 hypothesis of the study.

4.6. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Findings
The research model tested by structural equation modeling shows statistically significant and strong fit indices.
The model fit indices are presented below:

Table 6. Structural Model Fit Indices

Index	Value	Accepted Threshold
χ^2/df	1,94	< 3
CFI	0,96	> 0,90
GFI	0,95	> 0,90
RMSEA	0,049	< 0,08

The high model fit indicates that the research assumptions are statistically valid.
The findings demonstrate that commercial diplomacy affects export performance both directly and indirectly through the mediating role of country brand image.
This situation clearly reveals that country brand image serves as a strategic lever and that diplomatic activities have a dual impact on economic outcomes.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the relationship between commercial diplomacy, country brand image, and export performance.
The results demonstrated that commercial diplomacy positively affects export performance, both directly and indirectly through the mediating role of country brand image.
The strong correlation between commercial diplomacy and country brand image ($r = 0.81$) indicates that diplomatic efforts aimed at promoting national interests abroad substantially shape the international perception of a country's image.
This result aligns with previous research emphasizing the role of diplomacy in building and sustaining a positive country image in global markets (Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2008).
Moreover, the significant mediation effect found in this study supports the view that soft power mechanisms, such as country brand image, act as strategic levers in enhancing economic outcomes (Nye, 2004).
The ability of country brand image to influence consumer perceptions and trust in foreign products is further corroborated by the strong relationship between country image and export performance ($r = 0.78$).
Thus, diplomatic strategies focusing solely on traditional economic promotion may fall short unless accompanied by comprehensive branding and image-building efforts.
Furthermore, the structural equation modeling results confirmed that the research model had an excellent fit (CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.049), indicating the robustness of the conceptual framework proposed.
These findings contribute to the literature by reinforcing the idea that diplomatic activities must be integrated with nation branding strategies to maximize their impact on export success.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of commercial diplomacy on export performance, highlighting the mediating role of country brand image.

The empirical findings revealed that commercial diplomacy not only directly enhances export performance but also exerts an indirect influence through the improvement of a country's international image.
Key conclusions can be drawn from this research:
Commercial diplomacy significantly strengthens the competitive position of firms in international markets by facilitating access to trade networks and reducing market entry barriers.
A strong country brand image plays a critical role in amplifying the positive effects of diplomatic activities on export outcomes.
Policymakers should adopt a holistic approach that integrates diplomatic initiatives with nation branding and public diplomacy efforts to achieve sustainable export growth.
Future studies could explore different sectors and countries to generalize the findings and identify sector-specific dynamics.
Additionally, longitudinal studies would provide deeper insights into the evolving role of commercial diplomacy and country brand image over time.
In conclusion, commercial diplomacy and country brand image emerge as complementary forces that jointly shape a country's success in the increasingly competitive global trade environment.

7. Limitations

Although this study provides important insights into the relationship between commercial diplomacy, country brand image, and export performance, several limitations should be acknowledged.
First, the study is geographically limited to Turkey's export sector, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other national or regional contexts.
Second, the data were collected cross-sectionally; thus, the dynamic evolution of commercial diplomacy efforts and brand image perception over time could not be captured.
Third, although self-reported measures were used to collect data on perceived export performance, objective firm-level financial data would have strengthened the robustness of the results.
Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs, incorporating multiple industries across diverse countries, and using mixed methods approaches to enrich the findings.

8. Policy Implications and Future Research

The findings of this study suggest that policymakers should not view commercial diplomacy solely as a trade promotion tool but as an integrated soft power strategy that enhances national competitiveness in global markets.
Specifically, governments should:

- Establish specialized commercial diplomacy units targeting high-value-added sectors such as technology, renewable energy, pharmaceuticals, and luxury industries.
- Strengthen public-private partnerships to ensure that diplomatic initiatives are aligned with the needs and strategies of domestic firms.
- Invest in systematic nation branding programs that consistently communicate positive cultural, ethical, and technological images to international audiences.

Future studies could further investigate sector-specific dynamics, such as how commercial diplomacy and country brand image differently impact export performance in industries like automotive, agriculture, services, or creative industries.
In addition, examining the role of digital diplomacy and social media-driven nation branding strategies could offer new perspectives on managing international perceptions in the digital age.

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